

A Mid Year's Letter to KAP

It has been two and a half years now (February, 2006) since I last wrote a letter to you, the members of the Korean Academy of Psychotherapists. It is strange in some ways to be writing to so many of you at once since I much prefer individual relationships (even if, sadly, these days I do not have time for them!). I continue to consider it one of the great privileges of my life to have met Dr. Rhee and so many of you in KAP as well as to continue to learn so much about the unusual history and culture of Korea. I did not realize how much I had learned until I went to a lecture by the wife of the American Ambassador to Korea, an artist whose name is Lisa Vershbow, and attended a two day course on Korean culture, history, religion, and art with the Korean curator (a Korean woman) of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. In both cases, though I learned some new facts, there was very little of the essence of the Korean spirit that I had not already acquired from my relationships with you, the members of KAP. In particular, that spirit is a spirit of gentleness, kindness, humility, responsibility in one's relationships with friends and family, a history of peace, compassion for suffering, and a deep sense of common humanity.

I am moved at this moment to be somewhat more personal, if you do not mind. As humble as Korean people seem to me to be, they are also deeply and secretly proud and I have come to believe they have every reason to be. I am envious (not very Taoist I know!) that you are all a part of a culture of which you can be so proud, in which you can feel such dignity and inner integrity. Of course, Korea and Koreans are not perfect: there are problems about beef (what a mess!), genetic research, etc. We are all human. But being an American these days is an especially painful thing for me as it is a country which today seems to have little respect for the lives of other peoples, of other beings, and, even, of the planet itself. I was once so at ease with being from my country, with saying "Mee-guk eseo wat-sum-nee-da" (please forgive my spelling!). But since this millennium began I have felt quite different. I am very sad to say that I

now live in a country where the symbol for the human soul is merely this: \$. On the other hand, I am pleased to know so many people from a country which “has not lost its soul,” which retains its sense of history, its respect for human life and compassion for human suffering. I don’t want to simply idealize my experience of Korea and, again, I know we are all profoundly human, we are all incomplete, all tarnished; but the present contrast between our two nations makes me want to celebrate the greatness of the Korean spirit which has, of course, also, at least in part, risen from the greatness of its suffering.

There are a couple of things regarding Taopsychotherapy about which I have become increasingly clear. The first is what I think of now as the three great principles of this approach to ministering to the soul (that’s what Freud once called psychoanalysis: “a ministry of the soul”): emptiness, empathy, and compassion. Of course these three values or ways of being are also what lies at the heart of psychoanalytic technique, at the very core of all depth psychotherapy, but, in the west we are afraid somehow to speak directly of such “noble possibilities” lest we be accused of being unscientific. But there is no doubt in my mind that these three “virtues” are what all psychoanalytic theory and practice is about.

Emptiness. In psychoanalysis the analyst is encouraged to be neutral and to abstain. The rule of evenly hovering attention or evenly suspended attention is a way of listening and attending to the Other (called patient) that follows the principles of neutrality and abstinence. But what can this mean, essentially, except to empty one’s own mind of desire, ambition, preconception, fear, anxiety, insecurity, etc. just in order to allow the Other the possibility of appearing as freely and completely as the very person he or she is. Whatever we carry in our own minds and hearts about the Other and even for the Other takes away from his or her own possibility for appearing precisely as he or she actually is. The famous British object relations analyst Wilfred Bion recommended that every analyst approach every session without memory and desire, in other words, without any clinging to the past or the future. What can this mean but to approach every therapeutic encounter (not to mention every moment of living!) with as empty

a mind as possible. This is the optimal condition for Others' coming into being as themselves, from themselves in the very distinctive and particular way in which they *are* themselves. The more genuinely empty we can be as therapist, the more fully and freely the Others can be as the individual persons they are and are on their way to being. Sweet, sweet emptiness, the seed of all being.

Empathy. The last time I met with Dr. Rhee we talked for an hour about the next two primary "virtues" of Taopsychotherapy: empathy and compassion. I am not sure I completely understand his mind on these matters, probably because mine is still too full of things Western to let his understanding appear precisely as such! However, I tried, as I assure many of you have as well. So here is my understanding and you will have to ask Dr. Rhee himself how close it is to his! First of all, it has to be said that regardless of how empty-mindedly we approach Others (patients), if they do not experience from us the capacity or will to understand what their experience is really like for them it is not likely they will be inclined to disclose themselves freely to us. So the pregnant opening of an empty mind will be of little real benefit to others if that emptiness is not thoroughly imbued with empathy. Empathy comes from the Greek words *em* and *pathos*. The word *pathos* means suffering and is also akin to sorrow or mourning. The word *em* means with. So to *be* empathic (as opposed, by the way, to *having* empathy) is to be with the suffering, sorrow or mourning of the other. In psychotherapy it is essential for the Other to feel that we are both capable of and willing to be with them in their suffering, sorrow, or mourning whatever that may be. Although suffering as such may take many forms, mourning and sorrow both point directly to that kind of suffering that involves loss: of a child, a parent, a love, a wish, a hope, a home, a sense of worth, etc. The list can go on indefinitely but the suggestion that so much suffering involves loss is an interesting one: first, because it points to some kind of living attachment to something absent and, second, because it opens the very path to freedom. Remember, as Dr. Rhee often says and as we read in the Tao Te Ching, "the Tao is gained by daily loss. Loss upon loss until it comes to wu-wei." So in thinking about

empathy, as being with the Other's suffering, mourning or sorrow, we find that the very thing that tends to bring a person to therapy is the same thing that can open the door to healing, wholeness, freedom, enlightenment. En-*lighten*-ment can be seen in two ways: 1) to lighten up, to unload a burden, to make feathery and free and 2) to bring light, luminescence, sunshine and warmth to (reminiscent of Dr. Rhee's saying that "the therapist brings spring to the patient who is shivering in a frozen land."). All this emanating from empathy, from the therapists *being with the suffering, sorrow, and mourning of the patient*.

Compassion. In my conversation with Dr. Rhee, he pointed out that, etymologically speaking, empathy and compassion mean precisely the same thing. He is correct. Compassion comes from the combination of the Latin *pati*, which means suffering, and *com*, which means with. Thus, like empathy, compassion is to suffer with. However, compassion, even etymologically, has a hint of adding something else that was not quite present with empathy, namely, not only *feeling with* but also *feeling for*. Whereas empathy brings us into a profound relationship with the Other in his or her moment of suffering, compassion adds to this a sense of concern for that suffering, a sorrow for that suffering, a desire for the other to be somehow relieved of that suffering when the time is right. This understanding of compassion of adding to empathy's *feeling with*, the hint of also *feeling for*, is certainly in keeping with the Buddhist notion of compassion (*Karunā*) which speaks of the heart being moved on behalf of a person who is suffering. It is interesting that Freud used the term empathy only 12 times and the word compassion only 8 times in his entire collected works and not one of these times with reference to the process of psychotherapy or the attitude of the therapist. On the other hand, he was not at all hesitant to attribute much of the healing influence of analysis to what he called the "personal rapport" between the analyst and patient, and to announce, in a letter to Jung, that "Essentially, one might say, the cure is effected by love." Although Freud never said any such thing in his practical or theoretical papers, one begins to suspect, especially after reading so many deeply affectionate accounts of analyses with Freud by his patients, that this absence of

any mention of such personal qualities or virtues such as empathy, compassion, and love was mainly an outgrowth of 1) his own identification as a natural scientist, 2) his anxiety about the Pandora's box of passions with which he and humanity were seeing for the very first time, and 3) his rather shy, introverted, and often self effacing personality. Today the situation is very different among psychoanalyst, at least in America, who openly acknowledge, and even write about the significance of both the patient's love for the therapist and the analyst's love for the patient.

So this is one thing that I have learned, at least at this point, about Taopsychotherapy: the three principle qualities, virtues, or ways of being that lie at the heart of this form of therapy, namely, emptiness, empathy, and compassion.

The second thing I have learned about Taopsychotherapy is quite a different thing entirely. When I visited last, I kept asking myself what Taopsychotherapy is. What is it, essentially. The more I puzzled about it the more impossible it seemed to answer, when suddenly the answer began to show up in an entirely unexpected way. I found myself, while there in Korea, doing things I never do anyplace else. For example, when people were talking with me I found myself saying, "Heh? Heh? Heh? Heh?" Then I found myself clearing my throat with strange sounds, sounds I never emitted in America. And, then, if you will excuse me, I found myself not bothering to close my zipper entirely until *after* I left the bathroom. All these little moments made me wonder what was going on. Who am I, anyway? Where did these bizarre habits come from? Suddenly I realized where they came from and with this, I knew immediately what the essence of Taopsychotherapy was in a completely different manner. The essence of Taopsychotherapy *is* Dr. Rhee, Dr. Rhee, himself, through and through.

Now this is a problem! A problem because if Dr. Rhee is himself the essence of Taopsychotherapy, how can he, or anyone for that matter, possibly teach anyone other than Dr. Rhee to be a taopsychotherapist. For if you as his student would be Dr. Rhee, you wouldn't be yourself which is completely antithetical to the Tao since it is only your own Tao that you can

and indeed must follow. So then comes the second moment of enlightenment. Since Dr. Rhee is so impeccably, indeed insistently and even intractably himself, he is actually showing us that if we are to be taopsychotherapists we must be just as impeccably, insistently, and intractably ourselves, true to our very own nature, our very own being-in-the-world, our very own Tao. So the essence of Taopsychotherapy is not so unteachable at all! Be yourself. Even better, be yourself but don't cling to yourself. For in being yourself you show patient's the importance and freedom of being themselves, just as Dr. Rhee, wittingly or not, has shown and still shows us. And in not clinging to ourselves, that is by being empty, empathic and compassionate both with for others we show patient's that the so-called self is not such an important thing that it cannot be let go of in the service of life, in the service of the Tao, in the service of love.

There is much more that I would like to write to you and share but I am afraid this will have to wait for another occasion. I would personally like to thank Dr. Chung for his invitation to write you in this newsletter. I wish Dr. Rhee and all the members of the KAP a healthy, fulfilling, and meaningful second half of 2008!